

Seeing revolution non-linearly: www.filmingrevolution.org

Article (Accepted Version)

Lebow, Alisa (2016) Seeing revolution non-linearly: www.filmingrevolution.org. Visual Anthropology, 29 (3). pp. 278-295. ISSN 0894-9468

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This is an accepted article to be published by Taylor & Francis in *The Journal for Visual Anthropology* (Vol. 29, Issue 3, May 2016)

Available online as of May 2016 at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/08949468.2016.1154751>

Abstract: *Filming Revolution*, launched in 2015, is an online interactive data base documentary tracing the strands and strains of independent (mostly) documentary filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution. Consisting of edited interviews with 30 filmmakers, archivists, activists, and artists based in Egypt, the website is organised by the themes that emerged from the material, allowing the viewer to engage in an unlimited set of “curated dialogues” about issues related to filmmaking in Egypt since 2011. With its constellatory interactive design, *Filming Revolution* creates as much as documents a community of makers, as it attempts to grapple with approaches to filmmaking in the wake of such momentous historical events. The non-hierarchical polysemous structure of the project is meant to echo the rhizomatic, open-ended aspect of the revolution and its aftermath, in yet another affirmation and instantiation of contemporary civil revolution as a non-linear, ever-unfolding, on-going, event.

Filming Revolution in Our Times

As a documentary film scholar I was trained in the theories of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, the third cinema manifestos of Solanas and Getino and Glauber Rocha, the radical filmmaking practices that emerged out of Cuba after 1960 and Paris '68, such as those of Santiago Alvarez, or Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin's Dziga Vertov Group. Revolutionary movements, we learned, have always had their concomitant revolutionary aesthetics, and film has long been considered an important tool in the arsenal of revolutionary propaganda.² Revolutionary film movements have generally been understood to be a place of tremendous innovation, affecting the course of film history in myriad and notable ways. Yet while studying these movements, it was hard to conceive of any ferment of that magnitude occurring in the present era of neoliberal capitalist hegemony, either in terms of revolution or in terms of its resultant creative outpouring. The unexpected arrival of the revolutionary wave in North Africa and the Middle East shook that belief and demanded to be attended to. I proposed to make an interactive database documentary featuring interviews with Egyptian independent and documentary filmmakers considering their current work in relation to contemporary events.

My quest initially was to learn what this new revolutionary wave in Egypt might bring filmically: what approaches it would yield; what new theories might emerge. Much attention had already been taken up with the effects of new technologies and the ever proliferating associated media (many had perhaps too

quickly dubbed these revolutions Facebook or YouTube revolutions). However, my interest has been in the less well-documented strategies of filmmakers and artists who intended to make more reflective works, whether about the revolution or otherwise. I surmised that the revolution was likely to have had some effect on the practices of filmmakers and the project set out to understand those effects better. This initial inclination was somewhat modified by what I encountered, not least to do with the nascent recognition that the “civil language of revolution”, is not dependent upon nor entirely tied to the direction taken by the political fortunes of the “ruling revolution”. (Azoullay 2012)

While I did, of course, find people thinking innovatively about their own practice, I can’t say that I found any movement or tendency either in terms of attempts to narrate the revolutionary struggle, or in terms of developing a particular aesthetic approach to such representation. There are two clear reasons why that turned out to be the case. First and foremost, as Irit Neidhardt argues in her interview for the project, revolutionary film movements that have successfully narrated the story of their respective revolutions, have generally occurred in retrospect, once the revolution has been achieved. The battle for narrative occurs in the wake of the revolution, when the ruling class has changed along with its ideology (this is true in the case of the Soviets and the Algerians for instance).³ The revolution in Egypt is neither over nor can it have been declared successful at the level of having radically reorganized and reimagined the ruling regime. Thus there has been no opportunity to have crafted a new approach to cinema in line with the new reigning ideology, nor to have narrated the revolutionary struggle. Secondly, and relatedly, this revolution was not driven by a specific and explicit ideology. There was no leader, no party, and no elaborated platform much beyond the basic chants of bread, freedom and social justice.⁴ It quickly became clear that I needed to revise both my expectations and my approach. I decided to find out from the makers themselves what was driving their work, rather than pre-determining the questions and thus the answers, based on an outmoded script that seemed to have little bearing on the situation in Egypt.

Arriving in Cairo in December 2013, nearly three years after the toppling of Mubarak and several months after the summary removal of Mohammad Morsi, the international press was long gone, as were most foreign film crews and observers. Egypt was in the midst of the counter-revolutionary reconsolidation of the old-guard (the *feloul*, or “remnants”, as they are called in Egypt). By the time I came, with camera in hand, to talk with people about their film projects, the euphoric mood of the early days of the revolution had long since faded. Life in “post-revolutionary” Cairo has been replete with curfews, arrests, incarcerations, fraudulent elections, military trials for civilians and more. Since 2011, more than 2000 protesters have lost their lives and the calendar is dotted with dates marking major

protests, crackdowns, and massacres, the most recent of which was the brutal Rabaa massacre, which was then followed by a four month curfew lifted less than a month before I arrived.⁵

Unsurprisingly, it was not uncommon to encounter a revolutionary fatigue, verging on antipathy. Most of those I hoped to speak with had given multiple interviews since the events of 2011, and with the political climate so patently dismal, they might well have been expected to recoil in the face of new requests. Perhaps because I had not come to ask about the revolution per se, nor about their roles in it, but rather to discuss what they'd been working on since that time, I was pleased to find that there was still an openness to share projects, thoughts and ideas. The media and most researchers had moved on to the next hot spot or the next fashionable topic, yet coming to the conversation "late" as it were, had its advantages, precisely because I was clearly not looking for the recent trends, but instead, I was interested to find out what remains when the spotlight has dimmed and the sustained work of creative expression has nonetheless to continue.

The lull in revolutionary activity also meant that people had time to work on their projects and to reflect on their practice. The creative explosion that had been unleashed during the revolution did not suddenly fizzle and fade during this phase of political retrenchment. Rather it had to deepen and develop, as if a sprinter had transformed into a marathon runner. If it seems counter-intuitive that in such a morale-destroying political climate the river of ideas and creativity continued to steadily flow and grow, consider that while the revolution was clearly a rupture that opened a floodgate, this creativity was not entirely dormant before the revolution nor would it wither away under duress in its aftermath. Egypt has long had a thriving film industry and where there is a film industry, there is also inevitably (at least since the advent of lightweight, portable digital equipment) an independent sector, however informal and underfunded, existing side by side. Since at least the late 1990s, Egyptians had been making independent films, fictional, experimental as well as documentary, and in fact the revolution can even be said to have slowed some of this practice, as countless filmmakers instead turned citizen journalists and media activists out in the streets, putting their more elaborated creative works on hold. Yet alongside some of the seasoned filmmakers, many new voices are emerging, catalyzed at least in part by the events of 2011-12.

Thus, while the revolution cannot be used as the watershed event meant to delineate a clear break of pre-and post-, as with any major political/cultural/social upheaval there are nonetheless many as yet incalculable effects, including the proliferation of new ideas and work. The premise from which *Filming Revolution* begins is that a revolution is only the most visible moment of an on-going process, one which

does nonetheless affect creative movements profoundly and which deserves our careful consideration. *Filming Revolution*, the project for which I visited Cairo twice between December 2013 and June 2014, sets out to look specifically at independent filmmaking in Egypt, to consider that which may already have been in process, as well as that which was borne of the events. In doing this research, my ideas about filming this particular revolution and what it might have catalysed creatively changed considerably and it is in part these developments that this article will address.

To begin with, my idea of revolution has had to undergo revision. Events in Egypt (and across the region) have challenged conventional leftist definitions and expectations of revolution. As Asef Bayat asserts in the revised edition of his influential study, *Life as Politics*, revolution is never predictable, whether or not there are those plotting and planning for it. (Bayat 2013: 2) While there had been underground yet organised movement politics working for many years to unseat the power structure in Egypt, clearly the groundswell of support for the overthrow of Mubarak was not part of an organised and ideologically coherent political campaign. (Khatib 2012) It is not for me to declare the success or failure of the Egyptian revolution, but I have chosen to continue to embrace the word revolution in solidarity with those who have fought and died for it and in the belief that it is still far too early to fully perceive all that the revolutionary process has wrought. I do so with a necessary caveat, however, that it is not revolutionary film that I sought in Egypt, but rather film that has been made in the lead up to and wake of these transformative events, films which can be said to shape and be shaped by the context in which they were made. Regardless of the subject of the film, as one filmmaker interviewed for this project, Salma El Tarzi, asserts, “a revolution is more of a state of mind,” it influences all that one does, any film one might make.⁶ How this “state of mind” finds expression in film is precisely the concern of this project.

Along these lines, WJT Mitchell asks, “Would[n’t] it be better to think of revolutions, not as specifically definable events, but as subtle shifts in language, imagery, and the limits of the thinkable?” (Mitchell 2012: 3) Thus it is these shifts to which we attend. The events and their various political aspirations and ambitions, realized fully, partially or not at all, nevertheless should be seen to represent a profound disruption of the status quo with as yet incalculable effects. Beyond any measurable gains or losses, as if alongside the ruling revolution and almost apart from its trajectory, other forces have emerged which cannot be contained or defined by the “events” said to have precipitated them. Deleuze and Guattari had something like this in mind when describing May 1968 as a “pure event”, in that such an event is never reducible to causal linkages, and cannot be explained through traditional mechanisms whether historiographical or political in the narrow sense.

As they say in the opening sentence of their brief essay, “May 1968 did not take place”, “[i]n historical phenomena such as the revolution of 1789, the Commune, the revolution of 1917, there is always one part of the event that is irreducible to any social determinism, or to causal chains.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1984) And it is this excess, this remainder, that persists in the most fascinating and unpredictable ways, in Egypt no less than anywhere else where such historical ruptures have occurred. Breaking with the idea of causal links already implies a non-linear approach to revolution which the *Filming Revolution* project depicts in its own conceptualization. As an interactive digital archive project, the website brings together disparate voices and projects and creates thematic links between them, while never reducing these elements to any single position or narrative.

What follows is first a background and a description of this interactive documentary project that attempts to explore some of the creative practices emergent from this heightened and on-going condition of civil revolution in Egypt, and then a preliminary extrapolation of insights generated by the project itself.

Finding the Form

The challenge was to conceptualize a project that could investigate the scene of independent, mostly documentary, filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution while foregrounding the ideas and approaches of the filmmakers in question as well as examples of their work. I interviewed over 30 filmmakers, media activists, artists, and archivists,⁷ all based in Egypt and all involved, to one degree or another, in the events of the revolution. My interest was in creating, in effect, a **curated dialogue**, in part between myself and the filmmakers instigated by my inquiry, but as much also between the various filmmakers interviewed, so that even if they didn’t know of one another or their respective work (though many of them of course did), they would be “conversing” in a virtual space about issues and ideas that arose in relation to the main themes of the website. In practice, this meant editing the interviews based on themes that emerged through the interviews, so that the edited extracts could then be associated, or linked, to those themes. [Figure I]

In the process of investigating the “scene”, I am aware that in part I have also created one, in that the relations that emerge via the website’s graphic constellation may not entirely exist on the ground. These “conversations” occur in cyberspace, with interview extracts chosen by the website visitor in ways that may be harmonic or may conflict or contradict, and yet all participants of the website are implicated in a

field of relations determined by the architecture and vectoral graphics of the site. The participants of the project are brought into one platform in the same way that the historical context loosely frames their work, hopefully without over-determining either its strategies or its content.

The graphics were conceived of precisely in this way, as an effort to bring people's ideas into relation with others who are working in similar or related fields. If one hovers over a particular project, person, or theme, for instance on "Mosireen", the media collective that arose during the height of the revolution, one can see vectoral links to all of those interviewed who discussed and/or were part of the collective, thus graphically depicting those connections. [Figure II] Rather than introducing unnecessarily restrictive metaphorical paradigms such as a map of Egypt or Cairo delimiting the spaces in which the works are being made, or a timeline, that would place people's practices too fixedly along a chronology, I wanted the elements to find their own relations in a more crystalline structure, one that was changeable depending upon who chimed in on what topic, or who could be identified with which practices. We arrived at the final constellatory structure after several different design attempts, as the one that most closely corresponded to this permutating network of relations that I hoped to reflect. In addition to being an effective and apposite graphic principle, the idea of a constellation also resonates deeply with a Benjaminian reconsideration of the political in non-linear, non-causal terms, where "the then and now come into constellation like a flash of lightening." (Benjamin 1999, Benjamin 1968)⁸ Ideas and practices rub up against one another as one follows one's own interests and impulses, ideally generating connections and new revelations enabled precisely by the non-linear relations created through the interface. In practice, when one enters the website one encounters the main archive in the form of a constellation, [Figure III] and when one selects either a theme, a person, or a project, one enters into a cluster of associated material, rather like zooming in to an aggregate of stars in a portion of the sky. [Figure IV]

These clusters are important graphically, linking people speaking about the same theme, or working on a given project, indicating to the viewer/user who some of the players might be in any given arena. They are also important in terms of managing a potentially bewildering experience, as the global vision of the archive encountered may initially appear random and overwhelming, while the clusters are more contained in that they draw together relevant and related material out of the apparent chaos. Yet it is the grasping of connections more than the managing of chaos that this website most hopes to elicit.

The interactive platform also allows for a high degree of pluralism, with a broad range of ideas and positions available to be heard, in an order selected by the viewer/user. It thus enables this research to

serve as an archive for future research, opening up the possibilities and uses infinitely. The website also demands a deep engagement with the material, allowing the viewer to choose to stay with any interview that captures their imagination, or to “cut” to a different one based on their own interests. It should be said that this website goes against the received wisdom of internet usage, that insists people’s attention span is short, and that if it doesn’t grab in the first 4 seconds, they’ll click away. I envision a different sort of viewer: a reader or researcher, who in lieu of reading a text might engage in a multi-vectorial, polysemous academic website. I hope to have created a context for people to actively engage in my research with me, or to do their own research with the material I’ve gathered, alongside me. To that end, there is a comment gallery on the website for users to add their own insights and a curated dialogue area where users can post their “pathways” and ascribe their own themes to them. The database driven project thus serves as both a complete and authored research project in and of itself and an open resource for further research by, and/or with, an infinite number of potential “collaborators”.

It has taken some time for the website to begin to release its insights to me. Working on it for the better part of two years (between 2013-2015) I had amassed so much material (there are over 400 artifacts on the website and I am likely to be the only single person who will have watched all of the interviews from start to finish) that it was hard to understand much about what it, as an aggregate, might convey. No doubt I will continue to learn from the material and understand more from the interviews and the juxtapositions in time, just as I hope to benefit from the insights of others who engage with the website. Yet I have begun to be able to propose some tentative ideas that are becoming clear.

Following the threads of the interviews and the themes that emerged from them, I can identify three main interrelated insights about independent filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution:

- **No Grand Theory:** like the revolution itself, and unlike many revolutionary film movements before it, there is no particular theory or methodology being proposed that might distinguish the filmmaking of this period.
- **Resistance to Narrating the Revolution:** most of the filmmakers interviewed expressed a distinct disinclination toward creating specific narratives of the revolution or indeed, representing its events in any direct way.
- **First Person Filmmaking:** when choosing to represent questions of the revolution, personal, subjective, filmmaking seems to be a preferred approach.

While these are meant strictly as preliminary propositions, they are arrived at through the consideration of multiple perspectives on the topic. I will take each of these in turn, referring closely to the interview material from the website to support my thinking.

No Grand Theory

As indicated earlier, my film studies training in revolutionary film movements inclined me to look for a particular mode, method, or manner of filmmaking that fit this new era. And while it can be claimed that the new method is precisely the “shoot it, cut it, upload it”⁹ strategy, enabled by social media, in particular YouTube and Facebook, I have not chosen to focus on that form of media making in that it applies mainly to the moment of urgency and in the end constitutes more of a document than a documentary; a capturing of a moment, a contestation of an event, a quick retort, rather than a considered, extended, treatment of a theme or issue. It is very much dependent upon being “in the moment” — even its exhibition and distribution must be immediate—which mobilizes a different set of considerations about it, arguably more to do with journalism than with filmmaking, *per se*.¹⁰ There is a distinction to be registered between the filmer’s rough fragment— crucial as it may be for the activist in the heat of an event— and the filmmaker’s crafted reflection.

Actor, activist and producer Khalid Abdalla returns to this subject frequently in his interview, considering that initially the short form video was absolutely appropriate and necessary, but once the dust had begun to settle, longer form filmmaking was in order.¹¹ In fact, he argues that the filming that was done “of the moment and for the moment” can actually be repurposed for a much more extended consideration after the fact.¹² Abdalla speaks at length about the shift that had taken place where by late 2013, there was the possibility of reflection and the need to grapple with narrating the events in a more elaborated (Abdalla calls it “epic”) way. But whether there was the need, there didn’t seem to be the will, at least not yet.

One project that was in its nascent stages in my first visit and seems to have since been abandoned, intended to take up the challenge of narrating the revolution from the perspective of those on the street. It was a project initiated by Mustafa Bahagat, a self-identified video journalist (the only one I spoke with), and long-standing member of the Mosireen collective. Bahagat tells us that he hoped to bring together four or five other directors, each to pick a point in time of the revolution that they wanted to represent and draw from the ample material in the Mosireen archive. The film would build a picture of the key events based on the shared perspective of the activists on the ground. Bahagat’s vision was a collective one, where no one perspective or author’s vision would be privileged, and the

view would be shared amongst those with an ideological position that closely mirrored that of Mosireen. The project was to have no pretense to objectivity, but only to representing the truth as seen and shared by this group of video activists.¹³ Out of the 30+ people I spoke with on my two visits to Egypt, this was the only project that intended to construct a coherent narrative of the revolution, attempting to contest any newly emergent and co-opted versions as propounded by the official media or the state. And, notably, there was not, at least at the time of my research, a strong enough momentum to see it through. This may well be for reasons of timing and security, and the project may yet emerge at some point in the future. But not now.

If the idea of narrating the events of the revolution proved unpopular among the filmmakers I spoke with, there was an even more strenuous rejection of the idea that there would or could be a new revolutionary aesthetic, in part for the historical inaccuracy or ignorance that it implied. If anything, there could be said to be a continuity in style and filmic innovation, especially in terms of independent fiction films, initiated by filmmakers such as Youssef Chahine and his student Youssry Nasrallah, in the 1980s and 1990s. Others indicated a more recent turn brought about by the digital, also introduced by Nasrallah in the 1990s and even more impressively deployed in the service of low budget realist fiction films by Ibrahim El Batout and Ahmad Abdalla in the early 2000s.¹⁴ However one dates it, these shifts towards low budget, independent, realist filmmaking were already well underway by the time the revolution came, a claim made by several of the interviewees, including film historian/filmmaker Viola Shafik and filmmaker/film curator Alia Ayman.¹⁵

This fact is substantiated by a few important films that, while completed after the revolution, were conceived of and shot before the events of 2011, including Hala Lotfy's *Coming Forth by Day* (2012), and Tamer El Said's *In the Last Days of the City* (forthcoming at the time of this writing). Both of these films are recognized as exemplifying an innovative and distinct approach to filmmaking in Egypt, as well as in many ways foreshadowing the mood of the breaking point that led to what is now known as the revolution. Add to this list of impressive neo-realist films, Ahmad Abdalla's *Microphone* (2010), which all but implies the revolution to come, and you've got a triumvirate of nearly prophetic fiction films, all straddling the line between documentary and fiction, and all conveying an atmosphere of profound and unsustainable disquietude.¹⁶

The fact that these are fiction films, however realist and close to documentary in their approach, should be noted. If there can be said to be an emergent movement, firstly it would have to be dated from before the revolution, secondly it would have to be recognized as a movement towards an unfettered

realism in fiction. There cannot be said to be a similarly identifiable movement in the realm of documentary in Egypt, except perhaps in what I discern as a turn toward the personal voice, which I will discuss shortly.

Resistance to Narrating the Revolution

Nadine Khan, filmmaker and daughter of the well-known Egyptian filmmaker, Mohamed Khan, has come out strongly against what she sees as a counter-revolutionary effort to close-off and contain the revolution narratively, thus indicating that the revolution is over, which for her and many others, would be premature. Khan made a provocative one-minute video entitled *I Will Speak of the Revolution* (2011) where she holds the camera to the ground while walking to a protest and in voice-over decries all attempts to filmically narrate the revolution while it is still going on.¹⁷ The short was made as an enraged response to Yousry Nasrallah's controversial omnibus effort *18 Days*, which brought together 10 directors to produce 10 shorts about the revolution in a matter of 3 months, premiering at Cannes in May 2011.

Along the same lines of this critique is the commonly expressed view that it was sheer opportunism that led many filmmakers to make films about the revolution, certainly in the first years. The overwhelming position seemed to consider the prioritization of making one's film (and to be clear, this was never conflated with filming for the record, or for activist purposes), over and above participating in the events of the day, to be the epitome of self-interest, setting one's careerist objectives above the interests of the collective will of the people. This particular position is articulated over and over again in different ways.¹⁸

In short, the decision as to whether or not to make a film about the revolution is posited in moral terms, as an ethical quandary, whether to put oneself as a filmmaker first and in some sense capitalize on an unfolding drama for opportunistic gain, or whether one's duty was as a citizen first, which might or might not involve a camera, but certainly would not—according to some—involve turning it to your own personal and professional advantage. A minority dissenting position, voiced by veteran documentary filmmaker Tahani Rached, argues that during the height of the events everyone wanted to participate in any way they could, and as a filmmaker, making a film was the only real contribution she felt she could make.¹⁹

In addition to this ethical dilemma and the issue of prematurely foreclosing the revolution, another related position against making films about the revolution is the requisite distillation of events in an

attempt to make sense of them, leading to an oversimplification and thus misrepresentation. This is the contention of filmmaker Marouan Omara, who expresses the frustration (shared by many others) that the films that have been made about the revolution thus far, whether by Egyptians or outsiders, have all failed, generally attempting too neatly to contain it within a given space and time.²⁰

Rather than taking a direct approach, filmmakers like Omara believe that in fact any film about Egypt today, is in part a film about the revolution. That is the principle behind his beautifully realized film *Crop* (2012), made with his filmmaking partner Johanna Domke, about photojournalism in Egypt.²¹ Others are also making films about various issues or struggles that at first glance may not appear to be directly linked to the revolution, yet the revolution nonetheless informs both the subject and the approach. For instance, Jasmina Metwaly and Philip Rizk have chosen to focus their recent film projects on workers' struggles with the state and factory owners. Their impressive film *Out on the Street* (2015) takes a collaborative approach to filmmaking and an equally challenging approach to form, staging re-enactments of scenes of confrontation between workers and their bosses shot on a rooftop in downtown Cairo.²² There is little mention of the revolutionary foment that forms the backdrop of these battles, yet the context presses in from the periphery of extra-textual knowledge while importantly placing workers centre stage, something notably missing from many representations of the revolutionary events.

Metwaly and Rizk, like Omara and Domke, consider that there needs to be a formal intervention into how one represents events if there is to be any conceptual contribution to how we are able to think about them, even if the formal strategies that the two teams employ are very different experiments, with Metwaly and Rizk developing their innovative techniques from the lessons of Jean-Luc Godard and Peter Watkins, and Omara and Domke preferring a somewhat more muted, elliptical approach to their film not directly linked to any obvious predecessor. Both projects, stylistically divergent as they may be, operate on the borders between fiction and documentary, and both are projects that would be unlikely to have been made prior to the revolution yet neither sets out to explicate, elaborate or otherwise illuminate the events of the revolution. One can imagine a time where there might be more of an inclination to narrate the events of the revolution, but for now, at least for the filmmakers interviewed for this project, filmically narrating the revolution was generally viewed with some hostility.

First Person Filmmaking

If I were to identify a trend in Egyptian post-revolutionary independent documentary as it emerges from the interviews with filmmakers for this project, it would have to be the tendency toward making

personal films. This came as a surprise to me for many reasons, first among them was the recognition that films of and from past revolutions rarely put the filmmaker in the forefront, generally eschewing the personal for the collective voice. It seemed quite novel to me to learn about so many projects that either foregrounded the experience of the filmmaker or spoke from the subjective point of view. Fully one third of the 30 filmmakers included in the website had made or were working on a first person film. The treatment, the approach, the focus, the style, may have been different, but the point of view was squarely from the filmmaker's perspective. Thus, there are first person films being made about: personal identity (Alia Ayman's *Catharsis*, 2013); cultural identity (Nada Zatouna's upcoming film about being Nubian from Upper Egypt, *Kandake*); sexual harassment (Samaher Elkadi's *As I Want*) and sexuality (Salma El Tarzi's as yet untitled animated documentary); generational relations and politics (Mohamad Rashad's *Little Eagles* and Bassam Mortada's upcoming, as yet untitled, project about his father's imprisonment in the late 1980s); romance and politics (Nada Riyadh's forthcoming *Happily Ever After*); a collective/personal response to the revolution (Ahmed Nour's *Waves*, 2013); a complex political event (Ahmed Fawzy Saleh's upcoming *Fish are Killed Twice*, about the Port Said Massacre); history and its relationship to the present (*Arij: Scent of Revolution*, Viola Shafik, 2014).²³

As someone who has done quite a bit of research on the topic of first person film,²⁴ I was nonetheless unprepared to encounter so many projects of a personal nature coming from Egypt in this period, while at the same time gratified to see how each and every one, in its way, connected to larger collectivities, or issues, rather than signifying a retreat from the collective and the political. Filmmaker and well-known historian of Egyptian and Arabic cinema, Viola Shafik, explains it as a logical response to "a moment of truth" which the revolution wrought. She says, "a very strong historical moment of change throws people back on themselves ... the whole structure of society changes...perspectives change on the way," and "at the moment of truth you want to know more about yourself, as an individual [as you mirror and are mirrored by the country]."²⁵ Indeed, in her own project, *Arij: Scent of Revolution*, one can see the struggle to put the pieces back together, in the nascent effort to make sense of events whose implications have far reaching, yet incalculable, effects.

When asked about the choice to make a personal film, there was a range of responses. Some, like Nada Riyadh, had long intended to make a film about their personal lives — in her case about the difficulty of long-term relationships — and she ended up having to use material shot during the events of the revolution not as a dramatic backdrop, but as the overarching context that makes the tensions visible and without which, little in her story would have made sense.²⁶ Others, such as Ahmed Nour, downplay the personal aspect, emphasizing that the first person voice was meant to situate his film generationally.

He insists that if the film had been just about himself, it would not have been worth making, but that it is “personal and not personal”, placing himself and his story in the context of those of his generation, growing up in Suez, having lived through the waves of change and stasis of this particular historical moment.²⁷ Viola Shafik echoes the sentiment when she says about her own film that “it is a personal-collective film, because the ‘I’ that is speaking there, that’s not Viola only, it’s actually me and the people who have the same problem, trying to grapple with and understand the revolution and the history of the country, so, it’s me and not me.” These films mobilize a first person perspective as a way of connecting to larger collectivities without losing an articulated entanglement in and with the issues being raised. And all, without exception, speak in the first person plural “we” rather than in the individualist first person “I”.

The *Filming Revolution* website promises to yield many more insights and to suggest many more directions to be identified. These are merely some preliminary observations that come from someone perhaps too enmeshed in the complexities of creating the site to be best situated to see all it might imply. From the perspective of the maker, however, I learned many things from the process. The main lesson was to resist the temptation to over-determine the material by seeing it strictly through the lens of the revolution, even while recognizing that the revolution has influenced and affected many aspects of the work, creatively and infrastructurally. My initial inclination — to tie my queries too closely to the revolution — needed to be realigned to better correspond to that which actually occupied the thoughts and concerns of filmmakers working in Egypt currently.

The engagement with people doing the work and making the films helped me to revise my approach, rethink my strategy, undo my training, in effect. Instead, I followed the lead of those I interviewed and could then better understand the general refusal to construct grand narratives or even theorize a position vis a vis revolutionary aesthetics to run in line with the shape shifting revolution the world witnessed, that had neither leader nor dogma and is unrecognizable in some sense to those attuned to earlier renditions which became definitive of revolution. Like the decentered and headless revolution itself, there was a resistance to—we can even say rejection of—the drive to create master narratives in favor of much smaller stories and often, very personal ones.

Rather than constructing a linear story that neatly frames that which cannot be contained, *Filming Revolution* embraces the logic of refusing to frame or box-in any simple notions of the revolution in

Egyptian documentary and independent filmmaking today, resisting the tendency to speak in the language of power by monumentalizing and rigidifying events that defy such easy (or reductive) interpretations. In a move towards adequation of form and content, the *Filming Revolution* website attempts to match the open ended, counter-monumental, rhizomatic emergent structure of this revolution by translating it into an homologous platform (non-linear, non-hierarchical, spatially and temporally open-ended) that loosely parallels the sentiments and strategies expressed within it without attempting to master or constrain them. *Filming Revolution* functions as creative project and creative resource simultaneously, open to interpretation and inviting users to engage with the ideas of filmmakers who participated in one of the momentous events of our day.

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Filmography

Abdalla, Ahmad (dir.) 2009 *Heliopolis*. Egypt
 Abdalla, Ahmad (dir.) 2010 *Microphone*. Egypt
 Abdalla, Ahmad (dir.) 2013 *Rags and Tatters*. Egypt
 Abdalla, Ahmad (dir.) 2014 *Décor*. Egypt
 Ayman, Alia (dir.) 2013 *Catharsis*. Egypt/US
 Domke, Johanna and Omara, Marouan 2012 *Crop*. Egypt/Germany
 El Batout, Ibrahim (dir.) 2005 *Ithaki*. Egypt
 El Batout, Ibrahim (dir.) 2008 *Eye of the Sun*. Egypt
 El Batout, Ibrahim (dir.) 2010 *Hawi*. Egypt
 El Batout, Ibrahim (dir.) 2011 *Winter of Discontent*. Egypt
 Elkadi, Samaher (dir.) In-progress *As I Want*. Egypt
 El Said, Tamer (dir.) 2016 *In the Last Days of the City*. Egypt
 El Tarzi, Salma (dir.) 2013 *Underground/on the Surface*. Egypt
 Khan, Nadine (dir.) 2011 *I Will Speak of the Revolution*. Egypt
 Lebow, Alisa (dir.) 2015 *Filming Revolution*. UK
 Lotfy, Hala (dir.) 2012 *Coming Forth by Day*. Egypt
 Metwaly, Jasmina and Rizk, Philip (dir.) 2015 *Out on the Street*. Egypt
 Mortada, Bassem (dir.) 2012 *Reporting a Revolution*. Egypt
 Nasrallah, Yousry et. al. (dir.) 2011 *18 Days* Egypt
 Nour, Ahmed (dir.) 2013 *Waves*. Egypt
 Rached, Tahani (dir.) 2012 *A Deep Long Breath*. Egypt
 Rashad, Mohamad (dir.) In-progress *Little Eagles*. Egypt
 Rashwan, Ahmed (dir.) 2011 *Born on 25th of January*. Egypt
 Riyadh, Nada (dir.) In-progress *Happily Ever After*. Egypt
 Saleh, Ahmed Fawzy (dir.) In-progress *The Fish are Killed Twice*. Egypt
 Shafik, Viola (dir.) 2014 *Arij: Scent of Revolution*. Egypt/Germany
 Zatouna, Nada (dir.) In-progress *Kandake*. Egypt

Bio: Alisa Lebow is a Reader in Film Studies at University of Sussex. Her research is generally concerned with issues related to documentary film, recently to do with questions of “the political” in documentary. Her books *The Cinema of Me* (Wallflower, 2012) and *First Person Jewish* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008) explore aspects of the representation of self and subjectivity in first person documentary. She is also the co-editor of *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary* with Alexandra Juhasz (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). She is a filmmaker as well, whose work includes *For the Record: The World Tribunal on Iraq* (2007), *Treyf* (1998) and *Outlaw* (1994). Her most recent project, *Filming Revolution*, combines her scholarly and practical work: a Leverhulme Trust funded interactive documentary about filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution (www.filmingrevolution.org, 2015).

1 *Filming Revolution* was funded by a research grant from the Leverhulme Trust and further supported by University of Sussex, School of Media, Film and Music. For complete credits, see <http://filmingrevolution.org/page/credits>. For this article about the project, I would like to thank the editor, Mark Westmoreland, for his unwavering support and attentive reading of earlier drafts.

2 Lenin famously is said to have declared film to be crucial in the effort to convey the revolutionary message: “You must remember always that of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema” (*Sovietskoye Kino* No. 1-2, 1933, p. 10) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/jan/17.htm>.

3 Neidhardt, “taking an historical view: battleship potemkin + battle of algiers” http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/182/taking_an_historical_view_battleship_potemkin_battle_of_algiers. Throughout this article I will be referring to quotes, comments, and interview extracts from the website. For further evidence of Neidhardt’s position, see “Taking Stock”, 2013 <http://en.qantara.de/content/revolutionary-films-in-the-arab-world-taking-stock>.

4 And this was also the main organizing principle of the activist media collective Mosireen, as stated by Sherief Gaber, in interview extract "mosireen collective" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/79/the_mosireen_collective. This is not to say that there were no nuances to the struggle and no visionary claims. In fact there have been many. It is also not to claim that there has not been any coordinated political organizing in Egypt: there has been for decades, and there continues to be now as well, albeit underground. Yet it also appears to be true that the coalition of forces that converged to bring down Mubarak were so diverse that there could be little hope of a united platform.

5 The overall estimate of protesters killed (including the Rabaa massacre of 2013) is drawn from two sources: "After the Revolution Egypt Remembers its Martyrs" by Rana Mamdouh, January 25, 2013 <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14766>; and the Amnesty International 2014 Report "Egypt three years on, wide-scale repression continues unabated" <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/01/egypt-three-years-wide-scale-repression-continues-unabated/>.

6 Salma El Tarzi, "revolution is a state of mind" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/126/revolution_is_a_state_of_mind.

7 I shall refer to this diverse group of makers as "filmmakers" for brevity.

8 This emerges in his discussion of the image as "dialectics at a standstill" (Benjamin 1999: 463). He also warns, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," against the causal writing of history, insisting that rather than telling history in "a sequence of events like the beads of a rosary", an historian should grasp "the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one". (Benjamin 1968: 263) This chimes with the vision I have for an expanded version of the *Filming Revolution* website, which would feature material from past revolutionary struggles' filmic movements, and concurrent "present day" ones as well.

9 This is a term that Khalid Abdalla uses in the interview extract "shoot it, cut it, upload it: when it works, when it no longer works" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/27/%22Shoot_it_cut_it_upload_it%22when_it_works_and_when_it_no_longer_works.

10 Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose put this even more emphatically when they say "[t]he vernacular video document is often nothing *but* an inscription of presence within the text. It announces 'I was here', 'I experienced this', 'I saw that'." Emphasis theirs. (Dovey and Rose 2013, 367)

11 This comes up in four separate interview extracts: "shift from short form to long form" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/25/shift_from_short_form_to_long_form; "this epic moment requires longer form films" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/26/this_epic_moment_requires_longer_form_films; "shoot it cut it upload it-when it works and when it no longer works" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/27/%22Shoot_it_cut_it_upload_it%22when_it_works_and_when_it_no_longer_works; "radical awakenings" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/28/radical_awakenings.

12 Abdalla, "shift from short form to long form" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/25/shift_from_short_form_to_long_form.

13 Mustafa Bahagat, "no pretense to 'truth', just 'our' perspective" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/448/no_pretence_to_'truth'_just_'our'_perspective.

14 Ibrahim El Batout, originally a documentary filmmaker, has made several low budget independent features, including *Ithaki* (2005), *The Eye of the Sun* (2008), *The Juggler* (2010) and the post-revolution film *Winter of Discontent* (2011). Ahmad Abdalla began making films in a similar fashion a few years after El Batout, and his features include *Heliopolis* (2009), *Microphone* (2010), and his post-revolution film, *Rags and Tatters* (2013). His latest feature, *Décor* (2014) is a much bigger budget production with stars and a more polished aesthetic. Abdalla also edited El Batout's *Eye of the Sun* (co-written by Tamer El Said, interviewed for *Filming Revolution*).

15 Shafik, "both the political and cultural shifts predate the revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/342/both_the_political_and_cultural_shifts_predate_the_revolution, and "digital turn allowed for more personal filmmaking" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/350/digital_turn_allowed_for_more_personal_filmmaking; Ayman, "the new wave started before the revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/161/the_new_wave_started_before_the_revolution and "ibrahim el batout inspired this new wave" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/162/ibrahim_el_batout_inspired_this_new_wave; Neidhardt, "the change in independent filmmaking in egypt prior to the revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/183/the_change_in_independent_filmmaking_in_egypt_prior_to_the_revolution.

16 Tamer El Said talks about this in his interview extract, "not a prophesy" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/97/not_a_prophesy. There is also another, unfinished, project by Abdullah Sharkas that he was writing when the revolution broke, entitled *The Modern Art of Revolution* about which he claims it is the artist's role to be able to predict the future in a society, see "a prophetic title?" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/138/a_prophetic_title.

17 *I Will Speak of the Revolution*, http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/278/i_will_speak_of_the_revolution_2011_sending_a_message.

18 Salma El Tarzi "what to make a film about" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/122/what_to_make_a_film_about; Laila Samy "a matter of priorities", http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/198/a_matter_of_priorities; Nada Zatouna, "quick and easy simply doesn't work" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/269/quick_and_easy_simply_doesn't_work and "just have to mention revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/270/just_have_to_mention_revolution.

19 Tahani Rached, "no time for critical distance" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/335/no_time_for_critical_distance. Rached made the verité documentary *A Deep Long Breath* (2012) during the height of the revolution http://filmingrevolution.org/project/32/a_deep_long_breath.

20 Omara: "The problem with films about the revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/59/the_problem_with_films_about_the_revolution. Acclaimed producer/director, Marianne Khoury chimes in on this point: "the films explicitly about the revolution were the weakest" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/252/the_films_explicitly_about_revolution_were_the_weakest.

21 See Omara, "a film about the revolution without showing the revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/55/a_film_about_revolution_without_showing_revolution and *Crop* trailer http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/409/crop_trailer_johanna_domke_marouan_omara_2013.

22 For their discussion of this project, Jasmina Metwaly, "out on the streets the truth is always subjective" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/215/outin_the_streets_the_truth_is_always_subjective, and Philip Rizk, "baraf sh'era (out on the streets)" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/297/baraf_sh'era_outin_the_streets; "neither documentary nor fiction" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/298/neither_documentary_nor_fiction; "collaborative production process" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/299/collaborative_production_process; "introducing a theatrical dimension" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/301/introducing_a_theatrical_dimension.

23 My interviews were not exhaustive and there are many other documentary film projects underway or recently finished in Egypt, some of which are also first person films. One that traveled quite extensively in the west was a film called *Born on 25th of January* (Ahmed Rashwan, 2011). While it was also ostensibly a first person film, the first person voice was brought in more to give a chronological account of the events of the initial uprising rather than developing or deepening any subjective point of view. This is a rare project that attempts to narrate the revolution and as such instantiates many of the problems of the early rush to make films, so heavily criticized by many of my interviewees. Rashwan was not one of those interviewed for this project.

24 Most recently, see Lebow 2013 and Lebow 2012.

25 The first quote is from Shafik "major historical events throw people back on themselves" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/352/major_historical_events_throw_people_back_on_themselves. The second is from "the issue of the 'i' in recent egyptian documentaries" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/351/the_issue_of_the_%22i%22_in_recent_egyptian_documentaries.

26 Riyadh, "never intended to include the revolution" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/260/never_intended_to_include_the_revolution.

27 Nour, "personal and not personal" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/4/personal_and_not_personal; and Shafik, "arij is a personal-collective film" http://filmingrevolution.org/clip/349/arij_is_a_personalcollective_film.